

Persistence of Memory

Katharine Frost

Copyright Information

This ebook was automatically created by [FicLab](#) v1.0.102 on November 30th, 2023, based on content retrieved from www.fanfiction.net/s/1198656/.

The content in this book is copyrighted by [Katharine Frost](#) or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved unless explicitly stated otherwise. Please do not share or republish this work without the express permission of the copyright holder.

If you are the author or copyright holder, and would like further information about this ebook, please read the author FAQ at www.ficlab.com/author-faq.

This story was first published on January 25th, 2003, and was last updated on February 29th, 2004.

FicLab ID: Lrlw8kcc/lpkze2ay/50000E5U

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)
[Copyright Information](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[Summary](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Five](#)

Summary

title Persistence of Memory
author Katharine Frost
source <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/1198656/>
published January 25th, 2003
updated February 29th, 2004
words 15,632
chapters 5
status Abandoned
rating Fiction T
tags Abandoned, Drama/Romance, Fanfiction, Final Fantasy IX, Games

Description:

A revisiting of an older story, in greater detail. Whatever happens to Freya and Fratley after the end of the game? And what does Amarant have to do with any of it? (Oh my God! I actually updated!)

Chapter One

Disclaimer: Characters are property of Squaresoft.

Persistence of Memory

A Katharine Frost Production

Chapter One

There was nothing left of Freya Crescent's kingdom, and it seemed she was now — by bittersweet default — its sole protector. The ruins were eerily quiet as she picked through them, and she could not help but remember how it should have been, how the streets should have been filled with merchants and children and workers. Her steps echoed hollowly in the the empty, rainy streets; Burmecia was as damp as it had always been, and that consistency was almost comforting. Even when the rest of her people had filled the city, even when there had been laughter and joy — even then, it had always rained.

The worst bit about going through the debris was seeing things she recognized. The arm of a statue

that had once stood in the town square. The turned-over apple cart of the old rat who had lived a few doors away. The apples still visible in the ground, long-rotten from the rain. She wasn't sure why she had come. It seemed like everyone else had somebody, something to go back to. Even Vivi had the other black mages, even Eiko had her tribe of Moogles. She felt as though she were extinct, as much a destroyed relic as the things that surrounded her. Queen Garnet had been kind enough to let her stay in Alexandria whenever she wished, and she had been staying in Alexandria Castle for months, but Freya knew that welcomes could only last for a finite amount of time.

There was, of course, an internal desire to rebuild everything, to sway her people back from Lindblum, but it wasn't time for that yet. The wounds were still too new. It was difficult to admit it, but she needed to grieve, and she was at once disgusted, for it was foolish for one as supposedly stoic as a dragoon to wallow in pain. But, then again, she reflected, she had never been especially good at letting go of pain.

Though she was only half-conscious of it, her feet were drawing her towards the palace, now in shambles. Freya could see it from where she presently stood, near the armoury, and when she

paused to simply gaze for a moment, she heard footsteps catching up to her. It wasn't necessary to turn around to see who was there. Fratley, following her like a loyal puppy, bound to her merely by a lack of memory. It hurt her to see him, every time she looked at him, even though she would never say it aloud. The image of his face was like a cruel pastiche of someone she had once known and once loved, a child's drawing, or almost like a faded picture rendered into a real creature.

"Freya." Fratley's voice behind her, tinny and uncertain and completely unlike how his voice was supposed to be. "Is something the matter?"

She pulled her hat over her eyes, and closed them momentarily before walking again. "No, Fratley." They were at the entrance of the palace now, by the once-guarded gates. "I thought I asked you to wait for me at the city gates."

"I am sorry. I wanted to come with you this time."

She let it pass. The inside of the throne room of the ruined palace, the walls of which had formerly gleamed gold and ivory, was wet and dusty and miserable, a shadow of forgotten elegance. Unexpectedly, Freya thought of the first time she

had stepped into the grand hall, on the day she had finally been knighted, on her seventeenth birthday. She had been barely able to breathe as she'd knelt before the king and felt his spear touch either shoulder. She remembered how the women of the court, the dancers and musicians, had whispered furiously to each other as if scandalised — Freya, after all, was the first and only female Dragon Knight of Burmecia. But the criticism, the outrage, none of it had mattered, because Fratley had been there watching her, and she had blushed and curtsied and he'd bowed to her in return and they had danced — and she had loved him so much.

You would dare to dance with the scandal of the kingdom, Sir Fratley? I would dance with the scandal of the world a thousand times, if only she were you, Lady Freya.

And now he remembered none of it. She shook her head, to get the memory out before it brought tears to her eyes. She ran a claw over the battered throne. The floors were spattered and speckled with dark-coloured and dried blood, and she realised with a start that some of it was likely her own, from the first time they had fought the General Beatrix, from the first time she had ever laid eyes on Kuja. She sighed, clamped down the surge of anger that was

threatening to boil over within her, and wondered if it was ever possible to have things go back to the same.

“What are you doing?”

It was, abruptly, too much. “I want—” she began, and briefly it seemed as though she would be unable to choke the words out, “I want to leave here. I thought I could come. I cannot be here, not now, not when—” *Not when I have the pain of you, too.*

He was behind her then, carefully placing one claw on her shoulder. He left it unmoving, as if truly afraid to touch her. That was wrong, too, because the true Fratley knew that she was tough and knew that she need not be treated like a china doll — that she hated it. He didn’t say anything, only breathed in and out and waited for her own silence to end.

Instead of speaking, Freya turned and offered him a weak, watery smile. She felt suddenly guilty, seeing the gentle and wary concern in his eyes; he was childlike in spite of his broad and imposing frame. She had tried, again and again, to be kind with him, to be patient, but she was not good at it and wound up treating him like a baby a lot of the time. “I have forgotten you, too,” she whispered, and placed her claw over his own.

“You are the only one who remembers—”

“No,” she cut him off. ‘Don’t forgive me. I haven’t helped you at all. I’ve tried to make you be there for me, tried to use you as what you were, and that hasn’t been working, and I’m letting it — letting — let me help you first, Fratley.’ Every word was like an exhalation. “We need to solve you first.”

He moved back from her, confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean we’ve got to find a way to get your memory back.” She dropped her eyes and studied her claws, feeling somehow ashamed. Was she doing this for herself, to have him back? No, no, she insisted, it was for him because of course he’d want to remember all the wonderful bittersweet things she did. He’d want to remember Burmecia, and her. “We — we could leave here for a while, again. Put off the restoration and go back to Alexandria with Garnet and Zidane. If you want to,” she added hastily.

A little smile curved his lips, for the first time in weeks. He took a short look around, and Freya could nearly read his thoughts. She knew he wanted out of the ruins and destruction, too. Their surroundings were too sad. He turned back to her, lifted her claw

and politely kissed the back of it, for the briefest of moments. “Yes. I want to.”

The thick, lazy smoke in the small and dingy basement bar made it nearly impossible for Amarant Coral to see his current opponent. It wasn't like it mattered, though; every man in the bar save him was completely inebriated. He chuckled to himself from his hiding-spot behind his hair, and glanced quickly at the pile of gil at his right hat had, throughout the night, quadrupled. He had not lost yet, and every idiot in the bar had wanted a shot at him. Making money in Alexandria, he mused, much like any other city, was just a matter of knowing where to go.

His opponent, who was discernible through smoke as a mean-looking blob of man, flipped a Mandragora and laughed loudly, as if he had already won. Amarant watched coolly as his cards changed colour, paused a minute to let his opponent, then flipped all of the cards back with an Abadon. He couldn't quite see the look of surprise on his opponent's face, not with the haze in the way, but he could hear the swift uptake of breath from across the table.

“Better luck next time,” Amarant said snidely, pulling the man’s gil towards him by sweeping over it with one arm. He was about to open his money pouch and settle up for the evening when he was abruptly yanked out of his chair by his opponent — he could tell it was his opponent by the smell of the man. It was like an assault on Amarant’s too-keen senses, all whiskey and nicotine and sweat. Behind him were the dusty-brown shadows of the other people in the bar.

“I think we’ve got ourselves a filthy subber cheat.”

Amarant’s eyes narrowed behind his hair. *Subber* was a despicable word, racist and degrading, meaning *subhuman* and used by the ignorant to describe demi-human creatures of all kinds. He bared his teeth ferally, even though the drunken man still held him by the collar. “What did you call me?” he enunciated slowly, dangerously.

“I said — I called you dirtysubbercheat,” the man said quickly and sulkily, as if realising he’d gone too far. ‘Shouldn’t have expected any better,’ he added with a sneer. “Look, just give me back my money and we’ll call it even.”

In a flash, Amarant pushed the man away and had his claws out and ready. “I won’t give you a single gil. I won fair and square, and you know it.” He felt numb and he knew that was bad, because he honestly didn’t care if he had the money or not, if he got the shit beaten out of him or not. He didn’t even care about the name. It was like — going through the motions. It had been somehow better when he’d been a wanted man, with bounties on his own head, with Lani always nagging him and him always wanting to deck her one even if she was a bloody girl. Now he’d been cleared and everything exhilarating was gone. “You think you can take it from me?” he growled lowly, drawing himself up.

Whether it was drunkness or stupidity that caused the other man to not back down, Amarant didn’t know. “I think I can take you, you dirty cheat.” The men behind him murmured in agreement, and, before Amarant knew it, there was an angry mob on his hands.

Zidane Tribal was having a hard time trying to keep a straight face. He was sitting with Garnet in his friend Ruby’s theatre — they were in the “royal” box, which consisted of the front table in the small

room with a tablecloth thrown over it and a lit candle atop it — watching the premiere of Ruby’s newest play, which she had been quite proud to announce that she had penned herself. It was by no means a bad play, but the material was suspiciously familiar, and the sight of Lowell playing a sneaky thief after a beautiful princess’ heart — in the actor’s customary overblown style, no less — was almost painfully hilarious. Zidane smirked knowingly at Garnet and put his hand over hers at the table, and both stifled a giggle.

The final scene ended with a cloaked Lowell tossing off his disguise to reveal himself to a shocked Ruby. The audience was snickering appreciatively; all of them knew the story as well. The cast came out to take a bow, Cinna-as-Steiner looking very uncomfortable under a mountain of clanking armour, and Garnet and Zidane stood up to clap along with everyone else. Zidane stamped his feet and whistled.

While Lowell was still bowing onstage with gusto (and while his numerous admirers were gathered in a throng around him), Ruby ran up to them, looking flushed and happy. “What did ya think?” she asked breathlessly. “I know that

Lowell's a bit of a silly git, but if that's what draws in the crowds, he's good enough, I s'pose."

"It was very entertaining," Garnet said politely.

"Yeah," Zidane nodded emphatically. "It was. But — ah — Ruby, did you think of that story all on your own? No outside inspiration?"

"Sure did!" Ruby grinned widely.

Zidane smiled back, equally as wide. "That's what I thought. We'd best be going, though — Garnet has to get up early to meet with the Regent Cid and his wife, and it's already pretty late."

"Right. But — ah — Zidane?" Ruby pressed on.

"Uh-huh?"

She was blunt. "You tell that Blank, if you run into him, to come and see me sometimes." Briefly, a sad expression flitted through the blue-haired woman's eyes, but she turned away before Zidane could say anything more and went to another table to inquire about their reactions to her piece. Zidane shook his head and watched his friend admiringly, and wondered when Blank would wise up.

Garnet was tugging lightly on his sleeve. "Come on, Zidane. We've got to get going."

His head snapped around in a heartbeat, and, suddenly struck for the millionth time at how beautiful she was even in the low light of the playhouse, bent down to brush a kiss across her lips. “All right,” he murmured warmly.

They left the theatre hand-in-hand. Zidane was thinking about possibly steering Garnet to the edge of the docks, where the stars would be coming out. Surely Cid wouldn’t come too early in the morning? He looked at her sideways, she was smiling and waving at the people walking by. At first it had stunned the people of Alexandria, so accustomed to the detached Brahne, to see their queen walking among them, but now they were used to it and greeted Garnet in kind whenever she came by.

Alexandria itself was much better. The castle has been rebuilt, and though parts of it were still crumbled and unadorned, it was almost like it had been before everything. Most of the shops were re-opened, and some shopkeepers had even expanded their businesses. The only problem was that the kingdom’s revived nature had attracted some less-than-savoury types, thieves and drunks and bounty hunters. Zidane was admiring just how much work had been done on the city when a group of men came running out of the alleyway just after Ruby’s

theatre, nearly knocking him and Garnet over. He stepped in front of her and was astounded see a man with a familiar shock of flame-red hair scrambling away from the group. Amarant.

“Bloody cheat!” screamed one man.

“I’ll teach ya, rotten subber!” shouted another.

The name made Zidane’s blood boil, having not-quite-escaped it for most of his own life. Another angry man ran half-drunk into Zidane, and Zidane pushed him aside, roughly, and leapt into the fray. He wouldn’t allow his friend to be hurt, and, besides, Garnet was watching. Girls were always impressed when men fought well. He raised his fists in a challenge. “You’ll have to fight me, too!”

If Amarant wasn’t familiar to the men, Zidane certainly was. Even drunk, no Alexandrian man would dare hit the man who was likely to be their king, even if he was only a demi-human. Amarant slowed and stopped beside Zidane, his face ever-impassive.

The men poked and whispered to each other, none willing to step forward, and then mumbled discontentedly. “We’ll let ’er her go this time,” one said roughly, with a half-hearted snarl. “This time.

But ya better not show yer dirty face around us again. Ya got a lot to fear if ya do.”

“I’ll be sure to remember that,” Amarant replied sardonically, looking decidedly unimpressed.

“Yeah, well, ya do that,” the man said lamely, and the motley posse retreated. A few others shook their fists angrily, but the twin threat of Amarant and Zidane was enough to send them all away.

When the streets were clear, Amarant turned to Zidane. “You didn’t need to do that,” he said gruffly, brushing himself off. “But thanks anyway, Tribal. Good to see you haven’t changed a bit. I’d have hated to have to kill them all.”

“Are you insane?” Zidane scoffed with emphatic disbelief. Sometimes Amarant was too arrogant for his own good. “You’re skilled, but that was twenty on one! They’d have killed you if they’d wanted to!”

“Whatever you say,” Amarant said loftily. “See you around, Tribal. Garnet.” He tipped his head slightly to the queen, as was customary, and started to walk away, seemingly more slouched than normal.

“Wait!” Garnet called. “You haven’t even been here in Alexandria since — since Zidane came back!

And that was months ago! Where were you, in Madain Sari the whole time? In Treno? And now you show up unexplained, chased by an angry mob no less, and you're just going to leave without a spare word?"

"What was that all about, anyway?" Zidane wanted to know.

Amarant shrugged dismissively. "I won all their money at cards. They didn't like that much, me being an outsider and all, so they accused me of cheating and started after me. No big deal. When they sober up, they won't even remember it."

"Stay with us for a while," Garnet urged kindly. "You can't just show up for a few seconds and leave."

"Really," Amarant said dryly. His back was still to them; all Zidane could see was an unnatural expanse of shoulders and tangles of red hair. He frowned slightly. Amarant really did look a mess, with slight mats in his strange hair and little rips and tears in the fabric of his clothes.

Garnet frowned. "Don't be sarcastic," she admonished. "I'll not let you start brawls in the street like a criminal. Come on. I know you don't

have anywhere else to stay in Alexandria, and it's too late now to be on the roads. You can leave in the morning if our company is completely unbearable." She smiled a little.

"Yeah," Zidane added. "Will you stay?"

Amarant appeared to think for a minute, and then his face softened as much as a countenance like his possibly could. "All right," he conceded. "Free place to crash and all. But only for tonight. Got some bounties in Treno that I should be looking into."

It was well past midnight when Freya and Fratley made it back to Alexandria. They were the sole interruptors of the night, which was otherwise calm, and peaceful, and almost blindingly starry. The knights guarding the gates of Alexandria wordlessly helped them rope in their chocobos, but, apart from that short encounter, the journey had been nothing but silence between Freya and Fratley. There had been nothing to say.

As they walked towards the castle, through the empty streets, Freya was thinking to herself, not really aware of Fratley. Since defeating Kuja, she had gone to Burmecia a total of four times, and it

became no less painful with each visit. The idea of Burmecia was always there, in the back of her mind, as something that needed to be Dealt With Soon, but she never could bring herself to stay there. It was easier to not think about it. She needed healing, too, before she could heal her empire.

She glanced sideways at Fratley, walking beside him, and laced her claws neatly together, trying and failing to remain impassive-looking.

“Are you all right?” Fratley asked timidly.

“Yes. I only wanted to see my home city again. I should have known...”

“Was it sad for you?”

Freya saw no reason to lie. “Yes.” She gritted her teeth. It hadn’t been sad for him. why should it have been? He didn’t even remember Burmecia as it had once been, all of it was dissolved into memory for Fratley. She felt oddly betrayed.

Fratley was nodding. “That is understandable.” He walked on, silent and ever-respectable, but Freya could sense a question hanging unspoken between them, like thick air. “What are we going to do now?”

It must be hard for him, she realised, being led about blindly. Especially by her. “I told you. We’re going to concentrate on you. To — to help you remember. I want you to remember, before I want anything else to happen.” She knew as she said it that it wasn’t a lie. “There’s a scientist in Treno, maybe...” She let herself trail off. There were no other goals. She needed someone else with a recollection of Burmecia, and of beauty, of all the things that had once been good.

He smiled slightly, but it was a sad expression nonetheless. “We do not even know why I have no memory in the first place. You — you told me yourself, you do not know how it was lost, how I became this way.”

Freya looked at him fully. He was biting his lip, childishly, and again there was that inherent wrongness to his stature and to his features. He looked ready to cry, and her heart flipped over with half-guilt and half-worry. “I know, Fratley,” she whispered, and took his face in her claws, “I know.”

“I’m sorry,” he choked.

Always apologising, she noted. Always sorry. And then he was crying, not loudly but nobly, and Freya watched two lone iridescent tears fall over his

cheeks, leaving two thin wet streaks on his furry face. She took his claws in hers, and, since that gesture seemed insufficient, guided his head to rest against her own. He was silent, and for a while they stood in dead-quiet tableau, each hearing nothing but the breathing of the other.

“I loved you once,” she said, barely audible. “I can do it again.”

Persistence of Memory

A Katharine Frost Production

Chapter Two

You had to walk a goddamn mile just to get a goddamn drink in Alexandria Castle. Amarant stalked through the halls, utterly sleepless and at a loss as to where to find the kitchens at five o'clock in the morning. Why did the corridors have to be so bloody labyrinthine? There was a staircase leading down at his right. That was a good bet. Kitchens tended to be on lower floors. He wasn't lost, of course. Certainly not lost. He was just taking the longer route.

The bottom floor was just as bad as the upper — more red carpeting and probably about eight thousand doors. He was wondering if he would be able to find his way back to his room if he gave up when he turned a corner and found himself staring at a face he hadn't seen since Zidane's theatrical return. Freya Crescent. He also realised, quite belatedly, that he had stumbled into the kitchens.

She was looking at him with mild surprise. "Fancy meeting you here," she said dryly.

“Hello, Freya.” Amarant didn’t mind her so much. Zidane had always lumped them together for some reason — perhaps an imagined demi-human connection on their leader’s part — and she was slightly more tolerable than the rest of the band of do-gooders that had somehow attached itself to him. He actually had to stifle a laugh when he saw that she was in the process of slicing a rather large brick of cheese. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t sleep and I was hungry,” she explained pointedly. “I might ask the same.”

“Thirsty. And, the strangeness of you being awake in the castle at this ungodly hour notwithstanding, I meant — why are you in Alexandria?” He leaned against the wall and folded his arms across his chest. This stance was so habitual to him that he barely noticed it anymore.

“Why is it odd for me to be up and not you? I’ve been living in the castle for some time now,” she said shortly, and pressed down the cutting knife she was holding with a resounding *whack*. “You would know that if you ever cared to check in on us. I — I don’t think I’m quite ready to live in Burmecia alone quite yet.”

The words were mournful, the tone was not. “First of all, I’m not much for deep sleep. Never know who’s watching you. And alone in Burmecia?” he asked, with genuine surprise. “What about Sir Forgetful? He not with you anymore?”

She glared at him angrily. “Fratley is his name, you inconsiderate nit. He is still with me.” Amarant waited for her to elaborate, but she didn’t; she only continued slicing with unnecessary force. “And why are *you* here?” she asked without looking up at him.

He lifted his hands briefly, as if to say *who knows*, and then folded them across his chest again. “Garnet and Zidane invited me to stay. I accepted. I’m leaving tomorrow — well, today, I suppose.”

“Ah.” Freya didn’t look happy. She started to eat the little slices of cheese she had stacked up, and stared down at the long wooden table instead of looking up. He got the sense that she was straining to be civil. “What have you been up to?”

“Not much. Making money. Gambling and collecting bounties.”

She made a disapproving sound. “How distasteful.”

Amarant mentally took back what he had thought a few minutes earlier about her being slightly more tolerable than the rest of the group. She was just too priggish. “Excuse me,” he said loudly. “I wasn’t aware that my lifestyle offended you so deeply.”

To his surprise, Freya didn’t come back with a sharp barb. He fully expected it. She was an irritable and easily angered woman; he had known that ever since he’d made the mistake of crossing her path in Alexandria, the first time they had met. Bloody stubborn, just like a woman. But instead of voicing a quick retort, she just put her head in her claws. “I do not want to fight with you right now.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

She chuckled at that. “I just came here — to think. That’s all.”

“Why?”

“You say that as if thinking is the worst thing in the world, you know.” She leaned back and appraised him carefully. “If you must know, I don’t know what to do now. When I was young, I spent my life working to become a dragon knight. When Fratley vanished, I spent my life searching for him, hoping that he was alive. Then, finally, I decided to

help Zidane and the others, after I saw what had been done to my homeland. But now—”

“You don’t have a purpose,” Amarant finished.

“No — maybe.” She wrinkled her nose. ‘It’s not quite that. I do intend to work on the restoration of Burmecia.’ Having finished eating, she cleared off the table and wiped the dishes clean. “And tomorrow afternoon Fratley and I are leaving for Treno. I have some business with Doctor Tot. It’ll be a shame to miss Eiko and the Regent, though — I hope they are here yet when I return.”

Amarant’s ears pricked up at that. If there was anyone in the world he couldn’t stand, it was bossy little Eiko Carol, former mud-dwelling wild girl of Madain Sari, present princess-or-whatever-one-calls-the-daughter-of-a-regent of Lindblum. “A shame.” He coughed into his hand. “You’re going to Treno? I’m headin’ there myself tomorrow, to check on some bounties Lani told me about.”

“Really,” she said neutrally.

“Really,” he retorted. Did she have to be so obnoxious? “I’ll come with you. Need to get out before the brat gets here, and Treno’s a dangerous place, even in the middle of the afternoon.”

“Are you implying that I cannot take care of myself?” she asked sharply.

“Er — no.” It was true. She was probably the only woman in the world who might beat him in a fight, possibly except for Lani. There was presently a dangerous sort of glint in her eyes; he stepped back without realising it. “You bloody well can,” he added, thinking about the painful-looking pike she almost always had on her.

She muttered something to herself. He couldn’t quite hear it, but it sounded something like *stupid git*. Amarant grinned a little. *Chalk up another woman that hates me*. It was obvious that she was in a bad mood. Sir Forgetful had probably said something stupid to her earlier; he seemed like the dense type.

Amarant realised he had forgotten his original intent in coming to the kitchens. He found a pitcher of lemonade, and, while it was certainly not his first choice, it would do. He leaned sulkily — not intentionally, his manner of leaning was sulky by default — and drank, intent on ignoring Freya.

“Arse,” she said, with debatable good humour. He thought she sounded like she was laughing, a little. She got up, brushed past him, and made to

walk out of the kitchens, but paused for a second at the door. “See you tomorrow.”

As it turned out, in late afternoon, Freya found herself riding a chocobo alongside Fratley on the way to Treno, with Amarant lagging about a hundred paces behind them. The distance was suitably Amarant — close enough to be seen, but far enough away so as not to have to talk to anybody. Just like when they had all travelled together. There was something indefinable that she liked about the silent and unfriendly man; perhaps it was simply that, in his presence, she felt considerably less messed-up by comparison. She hid a smirk under the brim of her wide hat. Amarant would throttle her if he knew she was thinking of him so unfavourably.

Fratley, however, was worrying her even more. He had not said much to her since coming into Alexandria Castle the previous night, save their arrangements to come to Treno; it had been his silence that had driven her down to the kitchens early in the morning. She had been lying next to him, hearing him breathe in and out and feeling nothing, and noting the contrast between that and how it had been before, when she had loved to listen

to the soft rise and fall of his breathing. Presently he was riding his chocobo with a look of stony concentration on his face. It was like interacting with a rock wall.

Her hands tightened on the reins.

They arrived in Treno in early evening. She wasn't sure of the exact hour — it always seemed to be dusk in the city. The three of them left their chocobos outside the city limits, far enough from potential thieves but close enough to summon back with a loud call or whistle. Treno was, as always, busy. Freya had always thought it a funny sort of place, with the way the nobles and criminals could be found on the same streets, in the same buildings and stores, mingling but still distanced by class and snobbery. She craned her head back to check on Amarant; he was following them surreptitiously, his eyes darting around occasionally. There was no longer a bounty on his head, she knew — that had been cleared after he had come back from Memoria — but she supposed his old habits died hard.

Doctor Tot's house wasn't far into the city, and they managed to avoid the thieves for the time being — the pikes of the two Dragon Knights and the general threat of Amarant's hulking frame were

likely responsible for this. Freya stepped up in front of the two men and knocked at the door, briskly and loudly. There was a faint sound of fluttering and then the door opened to reveal a very-surprised looking Tot.

“Hello, there, Mistress Freya!” he called cheerfully, flapping his wings in excitement. ‘Come in, come in! What brings you here?’ He paused suddenly while ushering them in, and raised his eyebrows. “There isn’t any more trouble, is there?”

“No,” Freya assured him quickly. ‘I only want your medical and — er — scientific expertise.’ Burmecians had never been much for science. “I thought perhaps you could help me. If you’re willing.”

“Of course,” he said graciously, adjusting his too-small glasses. “We’ll go upstairs. It’s much cosier, I should say.” He started to hop up the stone steps, motioning for them to follow. Amarant slouched behind briefly, but soon all four were settled neatly on cushions in Tot’s extremely disorganised laboratory.

“You know Amarant,” Freya said, with a cursory wave in the man’s direction, and, then indicating Fratley: “And this is Fratley Irontail of Burmecia,

whom I believe you don't know. It's because of — er — him that we're here—”

“Fratley Irontail!” Tot exclaimed. “I’ve heard of you, of course; you’re only the most famous Dragon Knight to come out of Burmecia. What is the problem, after all? Should you be off defending things?”

“I have lost my memory,” Fratley said evenly, robotically.

“He can’t recall a thing about his past. Not even fragments,” Freya supplemented. She was annoyed to hear that he own voice sounded small and disgustingly fragile. “Almost his entire life is erased. I thought that perhaps you might know something about his condition — information, anything.”

Tot’s voice was exceedingly gentle. “Amnesia — loss of memory — is a difficult matter,

Freya. I am flattered you came here, yes, but I do not know how much I can do. There is no solid known cure. It’s been some time since I’ve read anything on the subject, but sometimes people live out their whole lives with no recollection, and sometimes it all just comes flooding back, so to speak.”

“I see,” said Freya, and her voice cracked. Was there nothing he could do? She did not like leaving Fratley’s fate to chance; she needed some element of control over the situation.

Tot had turned to Fratley. “There are different sorts of amnesia, really. The brain is a complex organ, and nobody really understands it much, not even the academics in Daguerreo.” He blinked owlishly. “I should like to try to help, however. Might I question you?”

Fratley turned to Freya. “Is that all right?”

She bit her lip. Why did he feel he had to ask her permission? “Yes. Of course.”

“It should only take an hour or so,” Tot said kindly, reassuringly. “You and Mister Amarant may go. I like to do my research in private. It’s a bit of a quirk of mine.”

Freya nodded, guiltily finding she was relieved to be able to leave Fratley, even if only for an hour. It was like, she realised with a twist in her stomach, leaving a child with a matron. “Thank you, Doctor,” she whispered. Amarant, who had not spoken or shifted throughout the entire exchange, followed her out.

Tot was unsure as to where to start. There was a twinge of anticipation in his stomach; it was not every day he was presented with a scientific case of such interest. And he remembered the sad look in Freya's eyes, and the defeated slump of her posture. Quite a contrast to the proud, dignified woman he remembered. He wanted to help her, and dearly. Fratley Irontail was watching him with a guarded curiosity. He realised that he had been quiet for too long. "What is your earliest memory?" he asked. As good a first question as any.

Fratley's answer was prompt. "I was in a forest. I woke up and there was patch of sunlight above me, and it was so white and so brilliant that I had to shield me eyes. I didn't know where I was. I remember standing, looking at my feet, my claws — thinking, yes, this is my body — but I couldn't think of my name, not for the life of me. I had a weapon, a pike, and I knew what this was called, just as I knew that the garment I was wearing was a jacket, and that the plants all around me were called goodoaks — is this helpful?"

"Indeed."

“I knew things, the names of things, the functions of things, but I could not recall my name, nor anything about myself, or even how I happened to end up in that forest. It turned out to be near Lindblum — I recognized Lindblum, if that’s important — and so I went into the city. There is — nothing — before that.”

Tot tried to imagine it. Being born again, sort of, as an adult with no knowledge. At least Fratley’s amnesia seemed to be the most common type — the kind where the victim can’t remember anything after a certain incident. “What did you do then?” Tot asked softly.

“I stayed in Lindblum. I worked—” Fratley rubbed his ear, contemplative. ‘Different things. I did the beast hunt one year, but I lost. I wonder if Freya would have found me, had I won. My name certainly would have gotten out.’ There was humoured twist to his face that Tot found distinctly strange. “It was about fourteen months of living in the Industrial District, doing whatever I could. The people there were nice to me. The children all knew me as the man with no memory. Then I decided to leave. I — I got restless. I needed to know where I was from. You can’t just live on not knowing, you know. It would have driven me mad. If I had stayed

—” Fratley left the thought unfinished and hanging in the air.

“And how did you finally find out who you were? Your name?” Tot was curious. It was, after all, a fascinating tale.

“Chance, I suppose.” Fratley laughed, minimally. “An obnoxious little Burmecian boy ran after me one day, screaming the name Fratley over and over. I didn’t know he was referring to me, at first — how could I have known? Turned out he was the prince of Burmecia. Turned out I was a Dragon Knight.”

Freya was quiet until they got outside of the house and to the entrance fountain. Amarant watched her warily from behind. She seemed quite distant, as if her mind were somewhere far away from her body. “Freya, I’m going to check on the bounties,” he said tonelessly. “Come with me, if you like.”

“All right,” she said loftily, as if she hadn’t really heard him. She looked extremely lost. He wrinkled his brow with nervous irritation. You couldn’t just walk around Treno looking all daft and faraway,

someone would deprive you of your possessions. “Amarant, do you think Tot can help?”

Amarant sighed, thinking that she must be feeling really far gone if she was looking to him for knowledge. Why was she asking him? He was not some bastion of comfort; all could give was brutal honesty. “I think all you can do is wait and see what happens.”

Freya looked at him crossly. “You could be more optimistic.”

He suddenly felt sorry, and the emotion was so alien that he felt like choking it out. It wasn't like she was his friend, really. They had just been companions in a war of sorts, once. People really did have the most dissatisfying habit of forming attachments. He looked at her furtively; her face was composed and her posture rigid, but he could tell from the overly bright sheen in her eyes that she was close to tears. Tot was probably her only hope. He silently willed her not to cry. If there was anything he hated, it was a bloody wailing woman.

“Never mind,” she said suddenly, yanking the brim of her hat down to shade her eyes. Only the slight quaver in her tone gave her away. “I wouldn't expect *you* to understand.”

He bristled at her words, unwillingly to admit that they stung a little. “And why not?”

“Forgive my prying, but have you ever loved anyone?”

“Not really.”

“See my point?” she asked callously.

“I suppose,” Amarant said wearily. He reminded himself to be patient with her. Her mood was brought on by stress, and he supposed she really didn’t mean to snipe at him. He felt an odd and not-quite-crushable obligation to make her feel better, even if such a notion was fleeting and ultimately meaningless. And, besides, he really needed to see if there were any good bounties at large. ‘I don’t want to stand here and argue you with about my personal life,’ he said shortly. “It’s none of your concern.”

Freya sighed, then nodded. “You’re right.”

The bounty hunter’s library — as it was facetiously called by its underground patrons — was located in one of the seedier corners of Treno, in the basement of a bar that made the one he had been in previously — the one in Alexandria — look like a regal palace. Amarant descended the stairs into the library first, followed by Freya, who seemed faintly

repulsed. “This is where you spend your free time?” she asked.

“I need to make money,” he said curtly. The poster-board was full of mugshots. He smiled sardonically to himself — there was one of his old partners, the one he’d worked with before Lani had inexplicably formed an attachment to him. The bounty on his head was only five thousand gil. Amarant snorted. Before he’d been cleared, the price on his head had been an impressive thirty-eight thousand. The list of current bounties, however, held nothing near so profitable. “Disgusting,” he muttered.

“What’s disgusting?” Freya was standing behind him, looking distinctly out-of-place.

“There’s nothing even worth going after. Hard times.” He scratched his head thoughtfully. ‘Suppose I had better stick with gambling for the time being,’ he added, mostly to nettle her. It didn’t seem to work. She wasn’t really paying attention; instead, she was taking in the library with open distaste. “Come on,” he said, oddly gentle in spite of her uppity expression. “Let’s walk.”

“All right.”

They strode together in peaceful silence. It was late, but not exceptionally late. The streets were uncharacteristically empty of people. There was probably a big auction going on or something, Amarant reasoned. It was oddly pretty, he realised before he could berate himself for a such a sentimental thought. A near-empty city of winding and warm brick pathways and dim, glowing lights, blanketed by the night sky.

They passed by the card tournament and abruptly the reason for the city's emptiness became clear — there seemed to be some sort of recreational card festival going on. Tables were arranged neatly out on the street and shaded by large umbrellas, like the outside of a small restaurant, and people of all persuasions were laughing and playing. It seemed pointless to Amarant — it didn't look as if any money was being wagered.

“Do you want to play?” Freya asked.

He turned to look down at her, surprised. “You play cards?”

“Not very often, but yes. I'm fairly good,” she said, without a trace of pomposity.

“Oh. Not as good as me, though.”

Now Freya wore a bemused expression on her face. She lifted up her hat to show him the gleaming doubt and amusement in her eyes. She looked like the Freya Crescent he knew from fighting. “Want to play me, then?” she offered carefully. “If you’re as good as you profess to be, then it should be an easy victory for you.”

“I don’t play unless I can win something.”

“That’s a rather sorry philosophy, Amarant Coral.” She looked away, peremptory, as if to dismiss him, but her voice was not without humour. “Then we’ll have to make a bet.”

“How much?”

“Hmm.” Freya began to circle him, tapping her chin thoughtfully. “No money, I’d say.”

“Then what?”

“Something a bit more fun. If you win,” she explained with a hint of a smile, “I owe you a favour. Anything within reason, to be called upon at any time you wish. If I win, though, you owe *me* a favour, to be called upon at any time *I* wish. Sound fair?”

“Within reason?” he queried.

“Yeah.” She nodded vigorously. ‘I mean, you couldn’t ask me to, say, knock off somebody for you. No dirty work. Things of that sort.’ She rubbed her claws together, mock-maniacally. “There will be a certain perverse pleasure in making the great and unmoving Amarant Coral do something at my command.”

Amarant considered for a moment. It did sound harmless enough — it wasn’t as if she was going to win against him, anyway — and her face did seem a touch more cheerful. Not that it mattered. “Agreed.”

Freya extended her claw. “Shake on it.”

He did so, and they took an empty table and the game began. He started out with a Namingway — a good solid starter card if there ever was one. She appeared to be pondering her move for about a minute, and she placed her card a cautious distance away from his. “Not touching that one,” she murmured.

She turned out to be a admirably decent and studious player. Her cards weren’t particularly stellar, but she used them cleverly, and the game soon was tied with only two moves remaining — first his, then hers. Amarant played his last card, a built-up Nova Dragon, which flipped over three of

her cards in a skillful combo. He saw a pained expression flit across her face. “Don’t feel too bad,” he said archly, not sorry at all. “No one can beat me.”

Freya glanced up at him, and then a devious little smirk took over her mouth. Slowly, agonizingly, she played her last card. Deliberately, she kept it covered, and languidly drew her hand away, as if just waking from sleep. A rare Blue Narciss. Four of his cards changed from blue to red in a heartbeat. Another combo. “Spoke too soon,” she said lightly, triumphantly. “Six-four. I win. You’d better start preparing yourself. I might be calling in that favour anytime.”

“Best two of three?” Amarant offered.

“Not a chance.”

Amarant stared down at the cards laid out, his eyes narrowing. Losing was a difficult thing for him to accept, even in something as paltry and unimportant as a game of cards, and especially to a little snip like Freya. “Let’s get back to Doctor Tot,” he grumbled.

Chapter Three

Persistence of Memory

A Katharine Frost Production

Chapter Three

Doctor Tot and Fratley were awaiting their return when Freya and Amarant came back into the laboratory. Freya was vaguely aware that Amarant was stewing grouchily behind her — no doubt still focused on their game of cards — but what was most important was Fratley. “We didn’t keep you waiting long, did we?” she asked politely.

“Not at all,” answered Doctor Tot. “Your timing was near-perfect; we’ve just finished up. Quite a fascinating life your Fratley has had. And that’s only the half of it.” The scientist’s eyes twinkled.

“And?” Freya pressed.

“Memory is a curious thing, my dear,” Tot said obscurely. “Nobody really understands how it works, how things are coded irreversibly into our minds. Fratley here has a sharp mind, actually; he knows the tiniest details about everything that

happened after whatever — incident — caused the memory loss in the first place. There are a lot of documented cases where a person remembers something *in place* of a lost memory, a fictional remembrance, or even the essence of a colour or a familiar sound — a fragment, so to speak. But Fratley is quite blank.”

“He wishes to hypnotise me,” Fratley added quietly.

“We’ve discussed it and decided it a wise course of action,” Tot explained. “Hypnosis is far from an exact science, but if we are able to extract something, anything, it may be worth it. We need to know how the memories were lost in the first place in order to determine how we should go about looking for a solution. It’s entirely possible that this information is somewhere in Fratley’s — er — subconscious mind.”

Freya bit her lip. Hypnosis and other such practices were regarded as little better than witchcraft in Burmecia, but, then again, she was no longer in Burmecia. “Is it safe?” she asked, keeping all of her other questions safely in her mind.

“Let him try, Freya,” Amarant said curtly from behind her. “No harm in trying.”

Freya opened her mouth to snap back at him, and then closed it wordlessly. He was right even if his intonation was less than kind. She nodded her head in quiet assent and sat down on a cushion to watch. Amarant followed her example and sat on the opposite side of Fratley. Fratley himself sat perched on a chair, waiting with an impassive and altogether soldier-like expression on his face.

“Ready?” Tot asked.

“Yes.”

“I need you to relax,” Tot said, and suddenly his voice seemed different, soothing and mellifluous, like liquid honey. “To calm yourself. Be as calm as you can. Be as focused as you can. Do not think of anything but what I am saying to you — you hear nothing but my voice.” Then Tot leaned down, close to Fratley, and began to whisper in a strange, rhythmic language Freya had never heard before. It was almost like the chanting of fairies. She glanced at Amarant, who only shrugged.

When Tot drew back, Fratley was lying bonelessly in the chair, staring blankly at nothing with lifeless green-brown eyes. “When you enter into the state of hypnosis, I want you to say whatever comes to you, no matter what is,” the

doctor continued. “Anything you recall. You are before you woke up in that forest in Lindblum — hours before of days before. Nod if you understand.”

Fratley’s head jerked once, nearly involuntarily. Freya gasped a little, in spite of herself. Tot stepped back even further, eyed Fratley carefully, and then plunked himself down next to Freya. For a long while, ages to Freya, no one spoke.

Amarant shuffled uncomfortably. “I don’t think it worked—”

“He is strong,” Fratley shouted suddenly, interrupting. All three of them jumped, even Amarant. Fratley’s eyes were wide and unblinking. And that voice — the voice that had come out of Fratley’s mouth certainly wasn’t his own. It was odd, disconnected, high-pitched and disturbingly familiar.

“Was that—” Freya whispered.

“Zorn,” Amarant finished flatly.

“Curious.” Tot blinked. “I wonder—”

“Strong, he is,” Fratley said loudly, in a similarly detached voice.

“And Thorn,” Freya added. There was a cold chill working its way along her spine, and, unconsciously, she wrapped her arms around her shoulders. “Doctor, how is this — possible?”

“Quiet,” said Tot. “I am not certain. The mind is often inexplicable, and sometimes capable of mimicry, of course. But listen, he is remembering something important. Perhaps even how his memory was lost.” The possibility was enough to keep her quiet.

“He may be able to defend Burmecia when we attack,” came the first voice — Zorn — again. Fratley was still staring depthlessly in his trancelike state. ‘Defend Burmecia when we attack,’ and now it was Thorn again, “he may be able to do.” Then he lapsed, his head falling back.

Freya got to her feet and bent over him with concern. “Do you think he’s—”

“You fools!” Fratley screeched loudly, causing Freya to stumble backwards in surprise — directly onto Amarant, who caught her by the upper arms and held onto them tensely, pulling her back down with him. She was only dimly aware of the fact that his sharp claws were digging through her clothes and hurting her. The voice that had exited Fratley’s

mouth, if it were possible, was a hundred times more frightening than Zorn's and Thorn's. Creepy, harsh, resonant, even cavernous, and decidedly female.

"Brahne?" Tot was astonished.

"It can't be," Freya choked. "She's dead."

"Get back. There's no need to worry about *him*," Brahne's voice continued, cold and calculating. Fratley's face was no longer static; it was miming that of the late queen's in a repulsively flawless impression. The disdainful quality of her voice was spot-on. 'I have someone to take care of him.' Then, sharply: "He is waking up! Did you bind him properly?"

"Yes, we did."

"We did, yes."

Freya was transfixed. She could hear herself breathing, quite loudly, but her mind couldn't connect. She could not tell herself to calm down. They had captured him. They had planned it all. Those bloody bastards had been planning to attack Burmecia for *months*.

"Where am I?" Fratley's own voice, disoriented, at last. She thought for a moment that he was out of

the hypnotic state, and finally angled away from Amarant (who let go instantly), but then Fratley continued. “Who are you? What have you done to me?” The questions were quick and panicky.

“We are your enemies.”

“Your enemies, we are.”

“I thought you did it properly!” Brahne again, sounding enraged. “Put a Silence spell on him, you incompetents!”

“Our apologies, my Queen.”

“No — you can’t — help—” Fratley was sobbing. Freya looked down; it didn’t seem right, somehow, to watch him cry. The pain must have been awful — torture? She had never seen him cry — not for fear, not for joy, not for anything.

“You will be silent.” His mouth was twisting, clownish and terrifying, coloured repulsive by the voices of the two jesters. “Be silent, you will.”

“Freya! Freya, I—” Fratley’s sob, brought back from a forgotten incident, was cut short.

There was a long, quiet stretch. Freya’s throat was caught. Her name. He had screamed her name in whatever horrible hellish torture chamber those

monsters had thrown him in. She knew she should be crying, screaming, but her throat was just too dry, as if she could never speak again, and the back of her mind had to point out what a sorry relationship it would be if she were mute and Fratley was still without memory. Belatedly, she realized that she had careened forward on her knees, and was resting on her elbows in a prone position. She felt two separate people, a wing on one shoulder and a claw on the other, drawing her back to them.

“The shock’s gotten to her. Go and get her some water,” she heard Tot say to Amarant, quietly commanding. ‘I’m going to take him out of it.’ Amarant went without protest, and the doctor turned his attention to her. “I am sorry, Freya,” Tot whispered, “that you had to bear witness to that. It cannot have been easy.”

I will be fine, Doctor. Don’t worry. Please take him out of his trance. That’s what she wanted to say. “...trance...” was what she managed to choke out. Her eyes were burning, too; in fact, it felt as if her entire body was a brushfire. She nodded towards Fratley, and Tot — blessedly — seemed to understand.

It seemed, regardless, that Fratley was done speaking. Tot went up and shook him gently. Freya watched. She felt a cold glass of water being pressed against her lips, and her claws came up to cup it near her face. She didn't bother looking up at Amarant; instead, she took a long sip and shook her head. Her name. She still couldn't believe he had called her name. How long had he been gone from Burmecia before they'd found him? Had he thought of her every day before then? She took another drink and let it sit in her mouth, willing herself not to cry and knowing she was dangerously close to it anyway.

Fratley was blinking back into consciousness. His eyes flickered rapidly, then opened slowly, as if he was coming out of a pleasant dream. Tot looked at him solicitously, waiting until Fratley realised where he was again. Fratley's gaze went from Freya to Amarant to Tot, then back to Freya again. His eyebrows lifted with concern. "Oh," he said undramatically. "Freya, are you ill? It didn't work, I assume?"

"It didn't — you don't remember what you just said?" Freya asked disbelievingly.

Fratley looked lost and a touch hurt. "No," he said slowly. He surveyed them all again, confused.

“Nothing. I remember — being told to relax, yes — and then nothing after all. Just blankness.”

“It was Brahne who did it,” Freya said dully. It struck her suddenly just how terrible it was. There was no way to get vengeance, really. Brahne was already dead and gone, probably still beached as a skeleton. ‘I — we heard her speaking, commanding. In your voice, but in her voice.’ Was she making any sense? She didn’t think so. “Brahne and her henchmen, the clowns, and they had you trapped and Silenced—”

“Silenced? Freya, what are you on about?” He slid off the chair and sat down across from her, gently removing the glass of water from her claws and rubbing her shoulders. “I don’t remember—”

“That’s exactly it. You don’t remember.”

Sir Forgetful was finally sleeping, two hours later, fitful and bunched up on a stack of cushions. Amarant watched him, not sure what to think. It had been disconcerting, even for him, to hear all those voices coming out of one mouth. And then there had been Freya’s reaction. He recalled holding her still; it had been like gripping somebody Petrified, like

when he had dragged a stone Lani half day to Conde Petie because neither had been carrying any Softs.

Freya and Doctor Tot were in the other room, talking quietly to each other, even though it was two in the morning. Amarant thought of the previous night and wondered if Freya ever slept. He resolved to remind her about it, and went closer to the conversation, leaning into the doorjamb, near enough to hear little snippets but not near enough to have to contribute.

“I don’t think,” Tot was saying, “that there is much you can do. Even I don’t know much about the magic they had in Burmecia. If he ever regains his memory, it will be by his own terms, and by grace. It’s not — uncommon — for memory to return in fragments, or even all at once. It could happen. All you have to do is help him through it.”

“I will try.”

“I have some books in my personal library that I shall lend you in the morning. There may be more in the shelves at Alexandria Castle — mine are unspecific, but they may demonstrate some valuable mental techniques that Sir Fratley can try — that you can assist him with. Tomorrow. As for now, Freya, you should get some sleep.”

Freya chuckled humourlessly. “After all that? I don’t think I can.”

Amarant chose this point to step in. “You damn well better,” he grumbled. “You weren’t sleeping last night, either. Don’t need you falling off your chocobo tomorrow.”

She turned to him and pursed her lips. There was an odd and somehow disheartening glint in her eyes. “Amarant,” she said. “Amarant Coral, he who never speaks, is telling me what’s good for me. Oh, how awful must I look?”

“You look like hell,” he said candidly. It was true. When he took a good look at her, it was hard to imagine that he hadn’t noticed straight away. She seemed thinner, and paler; there were purplish hollows underneath her eyes. And had her hair shone before? It certainly wasn’t shining now — it was dull, without lustre.

“Must not be too bad. You’re still being honest.” There was the briefest of changes in her demeanour; for a second, she was like she had been when they had played cards, which seemed now like centuries ago. It was gone in a flash, and Amarant wasn’t sure if he’d imagined it. ‘Okay. I’m going to rest,’ Freya breathed, disregarding Tot’s cluck of approval.

“Please remember the books. And please wake me early.”

She exited the room. Amarant stepped back to let her by. When she was past him, she turned and said, “I’ll see you sometime, I suppose.” Her voice was dry, polite. “Have to call in that favour one day, so don’t go off and cheat me out of my winnings.”

He didn’t understand. “What?”

“You’re leaving, aren’t you? Back to gambling, I thought?” Her brow was furrowed.

Of course. After all the excitement, he’d forgotten completely about why he’d come to Treno in the first place, and recalled the dearth of decent bounties. “I intend to return to Alexandria.” He didn’t know this until he said it, and, were it not entirely uncharacteristic of him, he would have clamped a hand over his mouth. Stupid. Now he was stuck riding back with her. He slouched back against the wall. ‘There are as many drunks to win money off of in Alexandria than anywhere else,’ he explained. “And a free place to sleep.”

“I see.”

“I’ve no great drive to get back to working with Lani anytime soon.”

Freya smiled, weak but genuine. “Then I shall ride back with you in morning.” She paused. ‘I know — it’s nothing to you — but I am glad you came. I loved fighting with you, all of you, and this feels like having a part of it back, even if it is just only a little part.’ She bent over to arrange a bed of pillows herself to sleep on, fussing a little. “Never mind. I suppose I’m just wishing—”

“It makes sense,” he said shortly. “Good night.”

Persistence of Memory

A Katharine Frost Production

Chapter Four

Though it seemed entirely impossible, the ride back to Alexandria was more tense than the ride from it. Amarant was, again, behind Freya and Fratley, trailing, watching, trying not to notice the dual stiff postures of the Dragon Knights. He supposed Freya had filled him in on everything he had said. Fratley didn't seem to be taking it well.

Oh, and bloody hell, how he needed a drink. The whole trip to Treno had been a bad move on his part. No good bounties, and the entirely creepy image of Fratley imitating Brahne stuck in his head to boot. And the damned chocobo was tempermental. It kept rearing up on him. Last thing he wanted. He looked over at the pair riding in front of him again and wondered, idly and uncharitably, if Fratley was incapable of adopting a relaxed frame. The man always seemed so *proper*.

Then again, Freya was like that, too. He supposed it was a Burmecia thing, really. Stuffy little backwater rodents. He snorted. Alexandria was now visible on the horizon; Amarant breathed a sigh of

relief. He couldn't take much more of them. At the city gates, he ducked away from them with a quick grunt, pointedly ignoring the harsh look Freya gave him. It wasn't his problem, really. None of his concern. He drowned the nagging bit of guilt in the back of mind — why should he feel guilty, after all, for leaving her? — and hauled himself into the nearest pub. It was too hot out to peruse them, and he needed some cool air on his sweat-sticky, leathery skin. In his opinion, chocobo riding was much more strenuous than it ought to be.

He went over to the bar and got a drink, then found a quiet table in the corner. There had been a time when he had always worn a hood in public, to conceal his face from regular humans, but Lani had discouraged him from it a long time ago. It wasn't such a bad idea now, he mused, taking in the barely-concealed hatred on the faces of the other patrons. Alexandria, it seemed, had quite the underground intolerance for *subber* demi-humans. He took a long swig and leaned back, his feet brushing the legs of the table, and glared at the room in general.

"I thought you were in Treno," came a voice from his left.

It was Steiner, still clad in the same old rusty mail. Amarant hid a smirk. Good old rustbucket. “Just got back,” he said curtly. “Needed a drink after a day with those rats. Didn’t know you go to bars.”

“I’m on patrol,” Steiner explained, unruffled. “It’s what I do now. There isn’t much war these days, of course, so I just look after the city and make sure it’s safe. I wouldn’t have liked doing this a while ago, but now I enjoy it. It’s good to have peace, you know? And it’s nice to know that having a sword isn’t so necessary in these times.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And it’s a really quiet night tonight. I haven’t come across a single fight or anything tonight. I suppose having the Knights of Pluto on duty every night is beginning to deter people from getting too rowdy.”

“Right,” Amarant said boredly. With ninety percent of people, this was his method of conversation. Listen and throw in a one-word sentence now and then. It had yet to fail him.

“What are you doing in a place like this?”

“Drinking,” he said snarkily, furtively looking around at the bar. He hadn’t really taken it in before,

having been drawn in simply by a swinging sign promising alcohol. It was sort of dirty, with a thick tar-and-nicotine smell that he recognized from most of the bars in Treno. “Obviously, I’m not here for the atmosphere.”

“Oh.” For some reason, Steiner took this a cue to sit down across from him, then the knight folded his massive hands neatly on the table and looked straight at Amarant. “You okay? I haven’t seen you — since Memoria — and now I find you getting drunk alone.”

Amarant swirled his drink and peered into it thoughtfully. It was watery ale, best suited for poor winos and rebellious teenagers. “Drunk?” He snorted. “It’d take me a year to get even remotely buzzed off of this Alexandrian garbage, Rusty,” he said.

If Steiner was put off by the nickname, he didn’t show it. “Really. How have you been?”

“Just perfect. How are you?” Amarant didn’t even look up at him.

Steiner blinked at the quick and skillful turn-around, but forged on nevertheless. “I’ve been — wonderful is the only word for it. I know that

probably disgusts you, but things are better than they've ever been. I can't seem to explain it."

Amarant smirked knowingly. Another besotted fool. "How is the General Beatrix?"

"She is fine," Steiner said happily, as if this were his favourite topic and he had been waiting to get to it all night. He leaned closer to Amarant, conspiratorial. "Queen Garnet is a lovely girl. All of my knights adore the very sight of her, half of the men in this country are in love with her, and, of course, Zidane still moons all over her. But, as for me — there's something to be said for a woman who could beat you in a fight if she ever got the notion into her head."

"Yeah—" Amarant said slowly. He downed the last of his drink and tipped a finger at the bartender, to indicate that he wanted another. He felt oddly discontented, and Steiner finally seemed to get the message, leaving him be. There was a sweet and numbing comfort in solitude, just like there was a sweet and numbing comfort in alcohol. "I am a man in love with my familiarities," Amarant grumbled to himself, and then the bartender came over with a refill and he didn't have to bother anymore, which

was good because he was starting to sound like a pansy.

“And then — then he only screamed my name. Loudly. And that was it,” Freya finished her story in a hushed tone; Fratley was asleep not five feet away from where she, Garnet, and Zidane were talking. Eiko was there, too, having just come from Lindblum that day, and dozing on Garnet’s lap.

“Wow,” Zidane whispered. “Just — wow. I never — never suspected Brahne.” He looked sideways at Garnet, perhaps to see how she was reacting to this new revelation about her mother. Garnet, to her credit, seemed to be taking it rather well, still threading her fingers idly through Eiko’s hair.

“I know,” Freya said. “And now you know.”

“You think it’ll help?”

“Perhaps.” She sighed and tried to sink into her chair.

“Why do you think they did it?” he pressed on.

“I’m not certain,” Freya answered heavily. ‘It’s possible that Brahne was planning to attack

Burmecia for a long time, even before she was influenced by Kuja. She wasn't well-liked in Burmecia, you know — many called the Queen of Alexandria a hater of demi-humans.' Freya caught Garnet's eye, to make sure she hadn't crossed the line, but Garnet's face was impassive. "Sir Fratley was Burmecia's Knight Captain. Perhaps the Queen simply meant to eliminate her biggest obstacle to victory — why, after all, would he have defended us if he had no memory of any allegiance to his country?"

Zidane nodded. It made sense. "He was pretty powerful, wasn't he?"

"He is yet," she said quietly, folding her hands in her lap. "Could — could I be left alone now, Zidane? It's late."

"Of course. Er — Freya?"

"Yes?"

He regarded her solemnly. "I'll help you as best as I can."

"So will I," Garnet chimed in softly.

Freya was shocked to feel her eyes burn with gratitude. A little smile touched her face as she took

in the three of them; she was glad of their kind friendships. Even with Fratley, in many ways, she was much luckier than most. “Thank you.”

When the three had trailed out of the room, Garnet carrying Eiko in her arms, Freya went to change into bedclothes, and then to stand over Fratley. She had always loved watching him sleep. She sat down on the mattress, beside him, idly threading the hem of her nightgown modestly around her knees. This was stupid. Why did she feel shy about it? They had curled against each other in the same bed for years, made love hundreds of times, and yet she felt like a guilty child, just sitting and watching him sleep, his face slack and vulnerable-looking. She had once thought it beautiful in sleep, his face, unguarded and masculine and all for her. Tentatively, she put a claw out to lightly stroke through his fine hair.

Freya was surprised when her stomach lurched painfully. Her eyes grew hot and teary, and she was only sitting and touching him in his sleep. She had forgotten touch, really. Certainly they still hugged each other, and gave physical comfort when it was necessary — but *this* — this was different, this sort of contact where she was allowed to touch him

anytime, in any manner, and vice versa, as if they belonged to one another.

There was a mirror across from them, propped up on an ornate wooden dresser. She caught her reflection in it. Her unencumbered appearance never failed to surprise her these days; without her hat and jacket and pike, she just looked tired and worn. She lifted a claw to trace the hollows under her eyes. They seemed deeper than they should have been, blue against her white-grey skin.

She couldn't get what had happened in Treno out of her mind. She patted Fratley's sleeping face and stood up, pacing the room. It was her habit to pace when restless, or worried, or both. She wondered, fleetingly, if she would be happier were she the one stuck with amnesia. But, then again, memory was worth the pain — at least to her. It looked to be shaping up as another sleepless night.

“F-F-Freya...” Fratley was murmuring, whispering in his sleep.

She went back over to him. “Hush,” she whispered, “hush, now.” He was quiet again. She felt oddly like a parent, and wondered what he had dreaming about — it might have been something sad, judging by the tone of his voice.

There must have been some sort of magic, or possibly a relic, that Zorn and Thorn had used to erase his memory, before they had tortured him and left to die in a forest. She thought guiltily of the newer scars that were on his face and arms, the ones she had not yet marked as her territory—

Oh, don't, Freya — I don't want you to kiss my scars.

I want to.

—how had he gotten them? She needed to think. She pulled a heavy robe over her nightclothes and left the room, making sure to close the door slowly and quietly so as not to wake Fratley.

Alexandria Castle was a good place for one to walk about in with something on his or her mind. The lights were always low, fiery torches, which, Freya thought with a touch of dry amusement, were perfect for brooding. There were probably passages in the castle no one had touched for a hundred years — and then she froze mid-step. The torture chamber — the one Fratley had been in — wasn't it possible that it was in the very same castle?

“Where d’you think you’re going?”

Freya turned around. It was Amarant, arms folded as usual, but there was something odd about him. His body seemed to be reeling a little, as if it had lost some degree of equilibrium. She looked at him reproachfully. “You’ve been drinking.”

He stepped towards her, then swayed about a bit before finally having to lean against a wall for support. “Yeah. Not so very much drunk, though. And don’t knock it ’til you’ve tried it.”

“I have tried it, thank you very much. I, however, know the meaning of temperance.”

“But you apparently *don’t* know the value of getting some goddamn sleep.” He blinked a little, and paused, as if trying to work out the words. “You’re runnin’ yourself ragged. Look at your *hair* — it used to be shiny — you’ve got to — where’re you going? You didn’t answer me.” He slurred these last words, but paradoxically he seemed quite aware of what was going on.

“Fine.” She glared. “I’m going to the dungeons.”

“Kinky.”

She ignored this and turned her back to him, striding forcefully down the hallway.

He caught up to her. “Sorry, sorry,” he said insincerely, holding up his claws palms-out as a peace offering. “What can I say? I’ve got a knack for pissing off women. Why’re you going to down the dungeons, really?”

Freya sighed. He really was drunk, she hadn’t heard so many words out of him in the whole time she’d known him. “I want to examine the torture devices.”

“I take back my apology.”

“Watch it.” She glared at him, then softened a little. “I wish to see if they are still there, and then I may take Sir Fratley there. There is a good chance that this is the castle where Brahne and her minions tortured him. It might — provide me with some clues. Now, if you don’t mind—” She started away again, but he just kept walking beside her. “Excuse me?” she said sharply.

“I’m coming with you,” he explained.

“You most certainly are not, you idiot sot,” she retorted. “You need to go and drink some water and then put your sorry hide into bed.”

“Then I’m going to take a leisurely stroll. Through the dungeons. Coincidentally.”

She felt like throwing her arms up into the air and shrieking, but she refused to give him the satisfaction. “Fine.” She grabbed his wrist roughly and dragged him down the corridor, then shoved him in front of the entrance to the basement. “You’re going first. Oh — and don’t forget, there may still be monsters down there.” There weren’t, but she felt like irritating him.

“You’re the one who’s currently unarmed,” he said snidely.

“Oh, just go in.”

Chapter Five

Persistence of Memory

A Katharine Frost Production

Chapter Five

Amarant was quite rudely pushed into the dungeon. He rubbed his shoulder injuredly. Damn, that had hurt, but then again he'd rather kiss a Black Mage than say it to Freya. "Even if the machines they used are in this castle, what good it is to look at them?" he pressed. "It doesn't help any."

"I did not ask you to come with me. I seem to recall that you volunteered." She stepped up next to him, so that they were walking side-by-side. He noticed offhandedly that she was biting her lip, slow and repetitive. "Feel free to leave whenever you like."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"No, I don't suppose you would be — not unless a bar popped up next to the ironmaiden."

“Hey, you never know, what with Alexandria expanding the way it is.”

It was unsurprisingly dark in the dungeon, but Freya remembered how to navigate it, and so she took the lead, Amarant stumbling after her. He had to squint to make out her form; she obviously didn't think to consider the fact that his eyes could not adjust to the dark as hers could. They were in the depths of the dungeon before he could make out anything but the shapes of things; he disliked it, having to forfeit his senses.

“Too damn quiet down here,” he grumbled. Swinging over them was a cage he knew, and he glared up it for a moment, as though he could vaporize it purely through anger.

Freya seemed not to hear him. “There's a room over here,” she muttered, and went off without even looking back at him. He had seen her this way before; when she became focused on something, it was as though everything else ceased to exist. He reckoned maybe that was why she was such a good fighter.

He followed her and was greeted with the sight of her touching a rack — the sort of machine used to stretch someone out until they died or talked or

whatever else. Amarant was not a stupid man, and, even with a slight hangover, he knew when to shut up, so he leaned back against the stone wall, unconsciously folding his arms.

She seemed to have forgotten herself; she was tracing the lines of each foul instrument. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“That people can use these. These are ancient, Amarant — these were made in the times when Alexandria warred with my people almost daily. And they were the ones who called us brutal and savage — called us less than them, stupid little subbers with no mind to anything but spears and fighting. Yet there’s nothing like this in Burmecia — *wasn’t* anything like in Burmecia.” Her voice was scarcely above a whisper; Amarant felt cold.

“Imagine stretching a man out.”

“Imagine them stretching *Fratley* out,” she spat.

He sighed. He really hated any sort of conversation that wasn’t of the here’s-your-gil-sir variety. “I’m sure Brahne wouldn’t—”

“Ha,” she said bitterly. “I’m sure she would.”

He was, too, but somehow he wanted to knock the image of Sir Forgetful getting tortured out of her head. “You could bring him down here. See if he remembers anything.”

“I can’t do that,” she said automatically.

“Why not?”

She spread out her claws. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“You’re probably right. I am pretty thick.”

Freya smiled — a small smile, but he caught it in the dark nonetheless. “For once, an honest word out of you.”

“Don’t get used to it, woman.” He stood up straight and walked over to her. “You done with the dungeon crawling, then? I’d have thought you’d have had enough of it back in the travelling days.”

“Yeah — fine. Let’s go back up.”

Silently, they crept back up into the castle, Amarant behind her again. He frowned under his hair, watching her; contrary to what she believed, he did understand (though whether or not he cared was an entirely different matter). He had seen how Freya treated Fratley — more like a child than a lover,

more like someone to be taken care of than someone on equal ground. If it weren't impossible, he might have been inclined to feel sorry for old Sir Forgetful.

They parted near the kitchens.

"Get some sleep, Freya," he said quietly.

"Take your own advice," she shot back. He watched her walk down the corridor. She was a damn complicated woman — but, then again, all women were. He very much preferred the kind you paid for by the hour.

"Get some sleep, Freya," came a mimicking voice from behind him.

Amarant wheeled around and saw Eiko Carol sitting blithely on the base of a statue, her eyes alight with amusement. He groaned inwardly. He'd forgotten she was coming. "It's past midnight, brat."

Eiko sniffed. "That's no way to treat a princess."

"If you're a princess, I'm a stuffed Moogle."

She rose delicately, smoothing down her dress. "Same old grouchy act, eh, Coral? Gotta admit, I'm surprised to see you here. What with all the other people around."

“You’ve grown a smart mouth.”

“Thank you,” she said with a grin.

His mouth twitched, but he clamped it shut before he could actually smile. Damn kid was a brat, but she could be funny. “I guess I’d better leave in the morning if you’re here and all. You know how I hate children.”

Eiko rolled her eyes. “Oh, shut up, you big idiot. You missed me, and you know you like being here with everybody. I can tell.”

“Free room and board. What’s not to like?”

“You’re staying a few more days, then?”

“Yeah, brat.” Amarant was already walking away from her; knowing she couldn’t see, he screwed his face up into a cringe. “I think I’m a masochist.” *Hell*, he added mentally. *I know I am.*

The morning found Freya sitting out on of the castle’s many balconies, the one outside her room, reading one of the heavy tomes Doctor Tot had given her. Burmecians had never put much stock in any sort of science, preferring instead to live

provincially, and spiritually. She forced herself to focus.

One can improve one's memory simply by performing associations; memory is fundamentally associative. A gift, for example, might cause a subject to remember a time when he received other gifts, perhaps a birthday, or Yuletide. Consequently, focusing on small details is important. If one wants to remember a event very well, one need only think on one thing, and remember each aspect of it — not just the visual, but the tactile—

“How is it?” Fratley asked.

“Dreadfully boring,” Freya answered, and snapped the book shut. She blinked rapidly and scowled down at the book. She had always like reading, but only for pleasure, and only if it was something interesting. “How people can devote their lives to studying rubbish like this is beyond me.”

“But is it useful?”

“I don't know.” She sat silent and thoughtful for a moment, letting the sun shine on her face. Then she turned and plucked the ribbon from her tail, rose, and pressed it into his claw. “Do you remember when you gave this to me?” There was an edge to

her voice that she tried to swallow, not liking the rawness of it.

“You know I don’t—”

“No, I mean — close your eyes and hold it and think about it.”

“Close my eyes?” he said doubtfully.

“Here, I’ll do it, too, so you don’t feel stupid.” She shut her eyes, feeling his claws in hers and the little snippet of ribbon in between.

It’s so ridiculous! So — so old-fashioned of you!

But I would like you to have it.

Why?

It’s customary for a knight to give to his lady.

I’m a knight, too, Sir Fratley Irontail. I’m not some maiden who’ll sigh over a trinket and wait for you to come home and dance a sorrow-dance every day until you do. I suppose that’s not my style, really. Too damsel-in-distress.

Freya—

Would you wear a ribbon for me?

Men don't wear them, Freya.

Oh, so you won't take your knight's favour? Should I be affronted? Should I run from the kingdom, scorned and alone, like in a fairy story? I suppose I could live in the wilds, free of all ribbons.

You're making fun of me.

You're so easy to make fun of. So serious. But really.

But really?

Would you wear it? I'll wear yours, I promise, even if I don't sigh over it and pine for you. And I know you'd feel like an idiot. But you know me. I'd get my silly pleasure out of it.

Fine.

Fine? You mean it?

Of course I do.

She broke away from him suddenly. "Do you remember anything?" she asked, and she was shocked at how odd her voice sounded, how hoarse. She was also unprepared for how angry she felt.

He looked down at her, eyes giving an apology neither of them wanted. “No.”

Freya nodded, and then pushed past him, back into the castle.

“Freya?”

She turned. He was holding the scrap of ribbon out to her.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be.” She took it from him gingerly, unconsciously avoiding the brush of his skin. She felt sick to her stomach, and sat on the edge of the bed, looking at the ribbon. Would it be so terrible not to put it back on? She had grown so accustomed to it being there that she had nearly forgotten its meaning, and now it seemed a gross disrespect to wear it still, when she had him but still yearned for him.

Freya shook her head, as though this would clear it of thoughts, and retied the little ribbon. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

He came to sit beside her. “Listen, Freya,” he began uneasily. “I think you might need a day off — from this, and from me. You’re trying to help me,

and I — I love you for it, but I don't want you to hurt yourself in the process."

He really was too serious, even now. How she wanted to be able to tease him, like she had before! But he would react differently — not with knowing humour, but with hurt, childlike confusion. "I think you're right," she said after a pause. "I'll go into Alexandria."

It took her a while to actually stand up and leave. She curled her claws into his once more, not touching any other part of him, no head to shoulder or knee to knee, and tried to remember that she had loved him in the first place. He was warm and cold at all once; like everything else to do with him, it was opposite.

I will never, ever learn, Amarant thought heatedly. *Ever.* He looked at the faces of the men around him, and curled a protective claw around his pile of chips. The largest of the men was watching him closely, with a mean glint in his eyes. "I think I recognize you," he drawled. "Ye're that cheat I heard about t'other night."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

“Sure yeh do — it’s him, ain’t it? Takin’ all our gil like that — nobody’s that good a gambler. And ‘twas like they said — shock o’ the weirdest hair. Haven’t got the Queen’s pretty-boy backin’ yeh this time.”

“I don’t need him,” Amarant said evenly.

“We want our gil back.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No. You see, you’ve made a mistake. It’s no longer *your* gil. It’s now *my* gil.” He was almost bored by it all — people were all the same, all too caught up with their money. He flicked a bit of dirt across the table at them, feeling reckless.

“Amarant?”

He turned in his chair and looked up, although he recognized the voice. What the hell was Freya doing? She was no stranger to dingy establishments, of course — but there was something about her seeing him at work that he didn’t like. He watched her as she surveyed the men around the table, her clear green eyes widening. Damn it all — wasn’t there a bar in Alexandria where he could go without

running into one of his former traveling companions? She wasn't supposed to be there. He wanted her out.

"You never learn," she said softly.

"I know."

She leaned down to whisper to him. "We have to get out of here. They're about to turn on you."

"You aren't armed," he hissed into her ear.

"I always am," she whispered coolly. 'Anyone who thinks he's a cheat has to take it up with me,' she said calmly to the men. A small crowd was beginning to form around them. "I do not recommend it," she added.

"Yeh, sure." The burly man stepped forward. "Pair o' subbers. Always stick together, ye know. Probably off makin' more mutants when they ain't cheating honest folk at cards."

Freya reacted instantly. She grabbed his arm and twisted it so far than even Amarant gaped. The man's eyes bulged out, and he shrieked so loudly that several of the spectators had to cover their eyes. Freya's teeth were gritted, but she spoke through

them. “Do not make me claw you,” she enunciated clearly.

“Gerroff!” he shouted. “Get ’er off of me!”

Freya let him go and shot him an icy glare, then surveyed the rest of the room. “Anyone else?”

Nobody said a thing.

“That’s what I thought.”

Freya grabbed Amarant’s arm and led him out of the bar, out into the daylight. She was breathing heavily when she turned back towards him, her eyes glowing furiously. “You all right?”

“I could have handled that myself.”

“How dare they! Saying those things!” she fumed.

“Freya, that’s what they do, they’re always like that—”

“And you put up with it?” She rounded on him. “How dare *you*! You probably were cheating them! This is the second time in twice that many days, Amarant! Is this what you do with your life? Play gil-ante with ruffians? No wonder you’re so—”

“So what?” he challenged, suddenly angry himself. It was of no concern to her. “So what, Freya?”

“Never mind.”

“Why are you even out here? Shouldn’t you still be in mourning?” he snapped. “Or were you just hungry for a fight? You lost me that goddamn money!”

“I thought I would sit and have time alone. Without having to *babysit*.”

“Ha! So that’s what you really think of Fratley, is it?”

“Watch it. I won’t defend you next time.”

“Why? Why should I watch it, Freya?” He grabbed her arm. “How dare you make your snide comments about me — as if your life is so perfect! So what if I play some cards to make money? So what if I drink some? You’re so wrapped up in Sir Forgetful! You’ve forgotten who you are! Just now, when you were threatening those men — I haven’t seen you that alive — well, I can’t remember the last time, really!

“Don’t strain yourself,” she spat. “This is the most I’ve heard out of you — ever.”

“You’re nothing but a fool chasing some ridiculous fantasy, trying to recreate a past that’s already *over*, dammit—”

She slapped him. Hard. “Go to hell,” she snarled, and stalked off before he could even think to reply.

He stood there, slightly dazed, with his claw pressed to the stinging spot where she’d struck him. “Goddamn,” he muttered.

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Copyright Information	2
Table of Contents	3
Summary	4
Chapter One	5
Chapter Three	45
Chapter Five	72